

CIA accused of unfairly firing 2 low-level aides

By Bill Gertz
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Two CIA field operatives based in Central America were the only agency officials summarily dismissed last week as a result of an internal probe of the Iran-Contra affair, according to Reagan administration intelligence officials.

The fact that junior operatives took the brunt of the disciplinary action leveled by CIA Director William Webster drew harsh criticism from the officials, who noted senior agency officials involved in the affair got off with less severe penalties.

The two who were dismissed were identified as Jim Atkins and Joe Fernandez, both CIA operatives involved with the administration's covert program of providing aid to the Nicaraguan resistance, said the officials, who agreed to discuss the issue on condition of anonymity.

The operatives were fired last week without any advance notice by the CIA's executive secretary and without a hearing by Mr. Webster, the officials said.

Several conservative senators reportedly have criticized Mr. Webster's action as "politically motivated" and plan to express their objections in a letter to the CIA director that will seek a reversal, according to Senate sources.

Mr. Atkins and Mr. Fernandez were unavailable for comment, and CIA spokesman William Devine declined to discuss yesterday the disciplinary action taken by Mr. Webster.

"Both men were just following instructions, and they were the two most junior people," said one intelligence official. "They were just told, 'You're fired. Merry Christmas. Be out by Dec. 31.'"

Another intelligence official noted: "It's just outrageous to see them thrown out in the street."

Some officials have compared the dismissals to similar action taken

during the 1970s by Adm. Stansfield Turner, CIA director under President Jimmy Carter. Adm. Turner, in an effort to clean house among the CIA operations directorate, summarily fired hundreds of the most experienced operatives with a terse written note.

The dismissals weakened the CIA's covert capabilities and set off a backlash against Adm. Turner by the network of current and former

CIA clandestine service specialists known as "the old boys."

One official said the dismissals of Mr. Atkins and Mr. Fernandez, who has seven children, have lowered the morale of some agents in the CIA's operations directorate who feel "if it happened to them, it can happen to us."

"They weren't the policy-makers," the source said of the two operatives. "The way it was handled has caused a lot of resentment, and they've begun to joke that Webster is the new Stan Turner."

Under federal law, the CIA director is one of the few government officials with the authority to fire employees without following standard procedures for dismissing federal workers. Normally, civil servants can appeal dismissals under labor laws, but the CIA is exempt from those laws.

Mr. Atkins, who was working in Honduras, and Mr. Fernandez, who was based in Costa Rica, were dismissed as a result of an internal investigation of the agency's role in the National Security Council-directed Iran-Contra operations. The probe was conducted by CIA special counsel Russell Bruemmer.

According to the officials, Mr. Atkins violated CIA regulations by allowing two shipments of food and medical supplies to be flown into a rebel camp at Bocay, Nicaragua, on an agency helicopter.

The base camp is the same location where 40 family members of the resistance fighters had starved to

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death due to lack of supplies during a congressional ban on support for the rebels, the officials said.

Mr. Atkins was not involved with Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, the dismissed NSC aide who had been working to assist a private resupply network for the rebels, officials said.

Mr. Fernandez, under orders from CIA Director William Casey, who died last May, sent a shipment of weapons to the Nicaraguan resistance for use against a Sandinista military patrol that had gone inside Honduras and was armed with SA-7 surface-to-air missiles.

"He [Mr. Fernandez] had been guiding some congressmen on [helicopter] tours of the region, and he didn't want them to get shot down with the SA-7s," one official said. "And he was doing what Bill Casey told him to do."

While Mr. Atkins and Mr. Fernandez were the only CIA officials fired by Mr. Webster, three senior officials were disciplined with letters of reprimand or transferrals, officials said.

Central America Task Force Chief Alan Fiers at first was demoted by Mr. Webster. But Mr. Fiers protested, claiming he had done nothing wrong, and as a result the demotion was rescinded to a letter of reprimand, officials said.

According to the officials, Mr. Webster told Mr. Fiers that action was taken against him as a result of political pressure from members of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Duane "Dewy" Clarridge, director of the CIA counterterrorism operations, also was reprimanded by Mr. Webster for allegedly making an unauthorized trip to South Africa, a charge unrelated to the Iran-Contra affair that surfaced during the probe, officials said. Mr. Clarridge reportedly denied the charge.

Charles Allen, Mr. Clarridge's analytical counterpart, received a reprimand from Mr. Webster for bending CIA regulations in responding to an NSC request for assistance in the secret Iran arms sales initiative, officials said.